

Learning Two Languages: Questions Parents Ask

Raising multilingual children offers opportunities as well as unique challenges. Parents may ask a range of questions: Should they speak to their child in their native language? How will that affect their child's ability to learn English? If they speak to their child in English, will he lose his native language? And what happens when parents speak to their child in two languages?

This article will answer many of these questions, while providing tips for what parents can do support their children's language and literacy development at home.

Talking With Children

Is it OK to speak to my child in my native language?

Talking to your child regularly lays the foundation for her language and literacy development. If you are most comfortable with your native language, you will be better able to communicate your feelings and ideas in that language. You can use words to label objects and describe what is happening as a way of teaching new words. You can recite rhymes and poems to develop her awareness of sounds. You can take turns talking about the day, things she notices, and books that you read together. By talking together, you teach your child about the purpose of language, while helping her express her feelings and ideas. And by speaking to your child in your native language, you also teach her about her culture and her identity.

But will speaking to my child in my native language make it harder for him to learn English when he goes to school?

Before children start school, they may be exposed to English on TV, in the playground, and in the print they see on cereal boxes and street signs. Children will learn a lot about English from the environment around them. If your child has also had some formal exposure to English, such as going to a playgroup in which English is the primary language spoken, then school can provide additional opportunities for him to learn the language. Children and teachers alike can serve as models, helping your child communicate what he knows and can do. You may even be surprised by how quickly he picks up the language as he plays and learns alongside other English-speaking children. If your child has had no formal exposure to English, he will use what he knows about his native language to learn English - which will be a major task. Talk with your child's teacher about your goals for your child, as well as any concerns you have.

My husband speaks to our daughter in English. I want to speak to her in my native language. Won't she get confused?

Learning even just one language is a complex process. But young children have the potential to learn more than one language. Again, what is most important is that you talk with your child in the language with which you are most comfortable, so you can have the types of conversations that promote your child's thinking and language development. It is also important to be a good language model and not mix up languages. That is, when talking with your child in English, don't mix in phrases and sentences from your native language. However, don't be surprised if your child uses words from both languages in one sentence. This is not a sign of confusion, but her current way of communicating what she wants to say.

If we only speak to our child in English, will he lose his ability to speak in native language?

Yes. You will therefore need to decide if you want your child to maintain his skills in your native language. Consider your long-term goals. If you and your family will not return to your home country, maintaining the native language may not be a priority. Also consider your family situation. If extended family members don't speak English, it will be important for your child to maintain his native language so he can communicate with people closest to him. Also consider how your child might feel about losing his native language and a sense of his cultural identity when he gets older.

My child insists on talking to me in English. How can I help her maintain her native language?

It requires time, persistence, and creativity. Some parents speak to their child only in their native language, even if their child responds in English. Other parents send their children to afterschool programs to learn more about their native language. You can also create routines to help your child maintain her native language - from outings with family members to watching movies and reading books in your native language.

My child is learning English as a second language. What should I do if he makes mistakes?

Avoid correcting your child or you might discourage him. A good way to help your child learn the "right"

way to say something is to affirm what he says, using the correct pronunciation, sentence structure, or grammar. For example, if your child says, "The mail comed," you might say, "You're right. The mail came. Let's see if we got a letter from Grandma."

Reading to Children

Is it OK to read books to my child in my native language?

Making a habit of reading together is important, no matter what language you read in. Reading to your child daily will increase her vocabulary, knowledge of the world, and understanding of story structure. If you are most comfortable with your native language, read to your child in that language. Then, you will be better able to read and talk about the stories as you read together. And by discussing stories with your child, you will help her develop language skills and better understand stories.

If I only read to my child in my native language, will he ever learn to read in English?

Yes, if he receives instruction. But reading aloud to your child in your native language will lay the foundation for learning to read in English. By building reading into your daily routine, your child will explore new concepts and ideas. At the same time, your child will increase his knowledge of print and books. He will learn how to open a book and that we read to the end of a line and return to the left to read another line. He will learn where a printed word begins and ends and learn the difference between a word and a letter. Research has shown that if children already know these important concepts about print in one language, they can apply them to reading in another language.

Should my child learn to read in English or our native language?

Learning to read is a complex process. Therefore, learning to read will be an easier task if your child is taught in the language she knows best. That way, she will not have to concentrate on learning to read and learning a new language at the same time. By learning to read in her stronger language, she will build the skills she needs to read in another language. The skills learned in one language will translate to the other language.

Other Questions Parents Ask

My child seems embarrassed when I speak to him in my native language. What can I do?

Help your child see that speaking another language is something to be proud of. You can share your pride in your language and your culture in a number of ways. Talk about family photos and events and special people in your lives. Tell your child about traditions and celebrate them together. Read fairy tales, myths, and other stories from your culture. Reading and talking about these stories will help your child learn new words and explore new concepts. At the same time, these stories will help your child learn about and take pride in your cultural values and traditions.

My cousin just came to this country and doesn't speak English. How can she help her toddler learn English?

Even if your cousin doesn't speak English, she can build connections with English-language speakers. She can take her toddler to story hour at her local public library. These times often include songs and finger plays in addition to a story read aloud by a librarian. Trips to the playground will also provide her child with opportunities to play alongside English-language speakers. Such activities will not only help her child learn English, but can help your cousin learn English as well.

What else can I do to help my child become a reader and writer?

Regardless of the language you use with your child, you can extend his literacy skills by reading, writing, and talking together as much as possible. Make shopping lists and write letters to special people together. Look at cookbooks and make your child's favorite recipes together. Tell stories together and write them down so you and your child can revisit them later. Read different types of books together, from poetry to storybooks to nonfiction. Talk to your child about the books he reads, his experiences, and what he imagines. By talking and reading to your child each day, by reading and writing yourself, and by listening to your child read to you, you will encourage a love of language and a lifelong love of reading.

Source: <http://www.pbs.org/parents/readinglanguage/articles/multifamilies/main.html>